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ABSTRACT

The study examined antecedents to high educational achievement of 42 selected Mexican Americans (university professors, third-year law students, and third- and fourth-year medical students) in 5 southwestern universities (4 in California and 1 in New Mexico). Two related considerations prompted the investigation: failure of many Mexican Americans to achieve collegiate success; and the assumptions of many writers that this lack of achievement is related to the parents' low level educational aspirations. All respondents were identified as being members of the Mexican American minority population either through self-disclosure, affiliation with minority campus groups, and/or information supplied by friends. A self-administered questionnaire was used to obtain data on family characteristics, educational background, language, and personal information. A total of 34 males and 8 females returned the questionnaire. Parents' support and encouragement was most frequently cited as the single factor contributing to the individual's high academic achievement. Teacher interest and high grade point average also seemed to play important roles in the respondents' achievement. Perhaps the variables that most influenced the respondents' success were those unmeasured variables that comprise "luck." (Author/MH)

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Antecedents to High Educational Achievement Among Southwestern Mexican Americans

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Fall 1982.

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Running head: High Educational Achievement

Abstract

This study examines antecedents to high educational achievement of selected Mexican Americans in five southwestern universities. A self-administered questionnaire was used to obtain data on family characteristics, personal and language information, as well as educational background. Parents' support and encouragement was the single most frequent response to the question on what factor contributed most to the individual's high academic achievement. Teacher interest and high GPA also seemed to play important roles in the respondents' achievement. Perhaps, the variables that most influenced the respondents' success were those unmeasured variables that comprise "luck."

Antecedents to High Educational Achievement Among Southwestern Mexican Americans

Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to examine antecedents to high educational achievement among a selected group of Mexican Americans in five southwestern universities. Two related considerations prompt this investigation: (1) failure of many Mexican Americans to achieve collegiate success; and (2) the assumptions of many writers that this lack of achievement is related to low level educational aspirations on the part of the parents of Mexican American children.

(1) As the second largest minority group in the United States, Mexican Americans are a particularly salient example of an ethnic group that is plagued by lack of educational opportunity and equality (Jackson & Cosca, 1974; Manuel, 1965). The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1974) reports that out of 100 Mexican American children who enter first grade, only 23 of these students complete college, as compared to 49 Anglo Americans who graduate from college. Many factors seem to contribute to this failure. Social scientists (Clark, 1959; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Saunders, 1954) frequently use as their framework for these findings the theory of damaging-culture with its base of low socioeconomic status (SES) and low academic achievement motivation. Other factors include: differences in family structures and parental socialization practices (Baratz & Baratz, 1970; Hess, 1969); peer relations and school environment (Coleman, et al., 1966; Gordon, et al., 1968); and SES (Lewis, 1966). SES, probably more than any

other factor, is cited as the main reason for Mexican Americans' failure to achieve academically. Assuming that SES is the cause for the lack of achievement leads to attempts to alleviate the conditions - described as "culture of poverty." Deficiency models are the result.

(2) The deficiency argument, as summarized by Hatch (1970), claims that the Mexican American child is deficient in language, intelligence, motivation, and emotional development. This theory has its origin in a series of studies beginning in the Thirties, which usually assert that lower educational achievement is directly related to such factors as home language and parents who are poor educational role models. Further, it assumes that Mexican American parents place little value on education (Saunders, 1954; Leyva, 1973; Zintz, 1963) as an explanation of why their children are not motivated to achieve in schools.

There is, however, little empirical research available to support the inference that low SES Mexican Americans possess attitudes towards education that are not conducive to educational achievement. This research is an effort to provide data on whether there exist among Mexican American families distinct factors which affect the level of educational attainment acquired by their members. Factors such as family characteristics, parental influence, language spoken, school experiences, and self-motivation are tabulated in order to depict the profiles of Mexican Americans who have achieved high academic success.

Method

Sample

There were 42 respondents to the questionnaire mailed to university professors, third-year law students, and third- and fourth-year medical

students at the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Southern California; the University of New Mexico; the University of California, Riverside; and the University of California, Santa Barbara. All recipients of the questionnaire were identified as being members of the Mexican American minority population, either through self-disclosure, affiliation with minority campus groups, and/or information supplied by friends. A total of 34 males and eight females returned the questionnaire.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 45 questions. The questions were divided into areas of investigation and included (1) family characteristics, (2) personal information, (3) language information, and (4) educational background.

The questionnaire used in the study was partially constructed by the researchers with additional items being taken from three doctoral dissertations using instruments to obtain data for similar research investigations.

Procedures

The questionnaires were mailed to a previously identified list of possible respondents so the data collected for this research are taken only from those questionnaires which were returned. It was not possible to make a random sampling since the return was so limited; however, it must be remembered that as a group, Mexican American professionals represent a very small sample and that there are few colleges and universities with substantial Mexican American student populations.

Family Characteristics

To provide a quick survey of the population's characteristics, a series of tables has been provided. The study indicates that 20 of the parents were born in Mexico, while 52 were born in the United States, and nine claimed other nationalities.

Insert Table 1 about here

Twenty-one percent of the respondents come from families in which there are seven or more children; 34 percent from families in which there are from four to six children; and 45 percent from families with one to three children. An interesting aside here is the birth order of the respondents and their place of birth, although these factors are not included in the tabulations. Seventeen of the respondents are first-born; six are second-born; seven are third-born; nine are fourth-born; one is fifth-born; one is sixth-born; and one is seventh-born. Ten were born in Mexico, 29 in the United States, and three in other countries.

Insert Table 2 about here

Questions concerning families' yearly income reveal that 50 percent of the families fall below a yearly income of $5,999, even though 55 percent of the families have four or more children. Fourteen percent of the families fall into the $2,999 or below yearly income bracket, while 29 percent make from $6,000 to $9,999, and 21 percent make $10,000 or above.

Insert Table 3 about here

The educational attainment of the parents may explain in part the low family incomes. Of the participants surveyed, 38 percent of the fathers had completed less than six years of public schooling, while 36 percent of the participants' mothers had six years or less of schooling; 40 percent of the fathers had from six to 12 years, while 56 percent of the mothers had the same; six of the fathers had some college, while two of the mothers did; and three of the fathers were college graduates, while two of the mothers had graduated from college.

Insert Table 4 about here

In response to the question concerning parental aspirations for more education, 18 stated that their father did aspire for more education, and 24 responded that their mother did.

The occupations of the respondents' fathers range from day laborer to civil engineer, and include three fathers who are farm workers, four who are truck drivers, six machinists, one shoemaker, one door-to-door salesman, three carpenters, construction workers, bricklayers, custodians, a blacksmith, a barber, a railroad section hand, a weaver of Chimayo blankets, an electronics technician, a regional supervisor for the U.S. Army, a postman who rose to superintendent of the Post Office, and a civil servant for the U.S. Navy.

The occupations of the mothers include three farm workers, two seamstresses, one registered nurse, one hair stylist, one cleaning woman, two waitresses, one packer in a citrus house, one factory worker, one telephone operator, one stenographer, and one elementary school teacher. By far the largest number of mothers are listed as housewives.

Language Information

The language information section includes ten questions related to language usage and situational variables. The distribution of numbers falls almost equally between use of Spanish and use of English except for those categories asking for their rating of their competence in oral and written communication. The majority responded that in both oral and written communication they felt a greater competence with English usage.

This is hardly surprising considering the nature of the schools they attended and the insistence of many educators that learning two languages causes developmental lags. This attitude continues in spite of research which suggests that where bilingualism does not ascribe a lower status, bilingual children were found to outperform their monolingual peers (Amodeo, 1977). The sample of this study, albeit small, would seem to confirm the assertion of Leopold (1939) that bilingualism may actually be intellectually beneficial.

Insert Table 5 about here

Educational Background

Fifty percent of the sample had either preschool or kindergarten experience prior to entering their first grade. The language used in these

schools was English, so these children could speak and understand English when they entered the first grade.

Forty-three percent of the sample were monolingual Spanish speakers. In the Anderson and Evans study (1976), the authors suggest that Mexican American children who speak little or no English in the home experience the most difficulty with instruction in school. One of the factors that facilitates an easy adjustment to an English-speaking world is a bilingual teacher. Eighty-six percent of the respondents report that their first grade teachers used Spanish in the classroom.

In studies on teacher/student interactions, Rosenshine (1971) and Jackson and Cosca (1974) explore the relationship between use of approval and achievement, and between criticism and control. The former show little or no relationships existing; the latter reveals significant negative correlates of achievement. Jackson and Cosca (1974) specifically pointed out that teachers favor Anglo students over their Spanish-speaking peers by calling on them more frequently and giving them more positive reinforcement. In reply to the question, "Did your teachers encourage you to succeed in school?," 67 percent answered yes.

The responses to participation in extra-curricular activities indicate that 67 percent of the respondents participated in athletics, but participation in all other activities (debate, drama, music, art, publications, etc.) were less than one-third of the total population. An interesting ancillary, however, is that 86 percent of the sample stated that they worked in order to help their families.

Insert Table 6 about here

Sixty percent of the respondents stated they had a letter grade average of A during their elementary schooling, while 70 percent had an A average in secondary school. Ninety-one percent had a B average or better in elementary school and ninety-one percent had a B average or better in secondary school.

Insert Table 7 about here

In response to the question on whether or not they desired to achieve academically, 76 percent responded in the affirmative. Eighty-six percent asserted that they did all school work assigned; seventy-four percent read in their free time; and 60 percent competed against friends or relatives while in school.

Parents' support and encouragement was the single most frequent response to the question on what single factor contributed most to the individual's high academic achievement. Some of the responses were as follows:

"Parents kept saying education was a way to get out of poverty and not work so hard."

"Subtle but positive encouragement from my mother to try to do my best in or out of the school classroom."

"A family that never pushed me to become someone."

"My parents' encouragement and Christian faith."

"The fact that my parents and teachers had high aspirations for me--they expected me to do well."

"Very good upbringing with supportive parents who were strict but not stifling."

"We were never made to do well in classes. They encouraged us by making learning fun and not an obligation. We were taught the value of money, to work for it and struggle, but we always had a 'choice' to be in school, to work in fields, or whatever. We learned to do things (work, school) to the best of our ability."

Seventy-one percent of the respondents believed that their parents were the motivating factor behind their achievement.

Conclusions

Assuming Mexican American parents have low level educational aspirations for their children does not hold true for this population. Obviously, the parents of this sample were able to motivate and encourage their children to succeed academically.

It is also interesting that neither birthplace of parents, number of children in the family, birth order, birthplace of respondents, or family income show significant differences on any level. Our respondents come from all levels of income, all sizes of families, and with parents from here, in Mexico, and elsewhere.

Parental eduational attainment and aspirations for more education show no trend which could be considered a factor in the resulting high educational achievement of their children.

Occupations of the parents fall into almost all of the categories listed in the Hall Jones Scale of Occupational Prestige for Males. Again, no trend can be determined. It is interesting to note that most of the mothers were either housewives, or had occupations which allowed them to be home when their children were home.

The language patterns seem to fall into fairly well balanced proportions and no direct effect can be determined that might influence later success.

Teacher support and encouragement seems to play an important role in the academic success of the respondents, as does their grade point average Students who do well in elementary and secondary schools are encouraged to continue their educational endeavors. GPA is one predictor of academic success and is also used as one criterion for admittance to graduate schools.

Jencks, Smith, Acland, et al. (1977) suggest that the greatest option for future economic success open to both white and minority students is the attainment of a college degree. Our respondents, despite widely divergent backgrounds, were able to obtain the goal and then surpass it. Perhaps the variables that most influenced their success are the unmeasured variables mentioned by Jencks (1972) in his first study which were simply referred to as "luck."

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Table 1

Distribution of

Birthplace of Parents

Birthplace	Father	Mother	Total
Mexico	11	9	20
United States	27	25	52
Other	4	5	9

Table 2

Distribution of Family Size

Number of Children in Family	Number	Percent
1 - 3 children	10	45
4 - 6 children	14	34
7 - over 9 children	9	21
Total	42	100

Table 3

Distribution of Family Income

Yearly Income	Number	Percent
Under $1,000	3	7
$1,000 - $2,999	3	7
$3,000 - $5,999	15	36
$6,000 - $9,999	12	29
$10,000 - over	9	21
Total	42	100

Table 4

Distribution of Parents'

Educational Attainment

Number of Years of School	Number	Percent
Mother:		
0 - 6 years	15	36
6 - 12 years	23	56
Some college	2	4
College Graduate	2	4
Father:		
0 - 6 years	16	38
6 - 12 years	17	40
Some college	6	15
College graduate	3	7

Table 5

Distribution of Language Usage

	Percent		
	Span.	Eng.	Both
Parent's language w/respondent	40	26	34
Parent's language w/each other	48	26	26
Respondents' language w/parents	40	20	40
Respondents' language w/friends	5	40	55
In which language do you communicate best orally?	7	74	19
In which language do you communicate best written?	7	84	9

Table 6

Educational Background

Question	Percent	
	Yes	No
Preschool or kindergarten?	50	50
Speak/understand English upon school entry?	57	43
Did teachers encourage?	67	33
Participate in athletics?	67	33
Participate in debate, drama?	26	74
Participate in music, art?	38	62
Participate in publications?	33	67
Participate in social?	40	60

Table 7

GPA - Elementary/Secondary

Level	A		B		C or below	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Elementary	25	60	13	31	4	9
Secondary	29	70	9	21	4	9